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PREPARATION

Making Soft Cheeses

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Quick Facts...

Soft cheeses can be made at home without specialized equipment. They have a refrigerator life of five to seven days.

Neufchatel cheese is a milky-white cheese with a soft, smooth texture.

Cream cheese and pizza cheese also are soft cheeses that can be made in home kitchens.

Specialty cheeses such as flavored cheese spreads can be made with either cream cheese or Neufchatel.

The microwave oven can be used to make soft cheeses, eliminating the need for a double boiler.

Cheese, a concentrated form of milk, is rich in protein, calcium and riboflavin. About 10 pounds of milk are required to make 1 pound of cheese.

Soft cheese can be made at home without specialized equipment. Soft cheese contains over 45 percent water, while hard and semihard cheeses contain 30 to 45 percent water. Dry hard cheeses have less than 30 percent moisture content.

Soft cheeses, which are easy to make at home, are the most perishable and have a refrigerator life of five to seven days. Hard cheeses may keep up to one year or more in a cool place when they are protected from the drying effects of air.

The following recipes call for pasteurized homogenized milk. **If using milk from your own animals, pasteurize for safety.** Use reconstituted nonfat dry milk for increased economy. To reduce sodium intake, decrease or eliminate salt in these recipes.

Equipment for Making Soft Cheese

- Thermometer that reaches temperatures of 40 to 125 degrees F.
- Large double boiler with about a 5-quart capacity for 1 gallon of milk. (Two large cooking pots of different sizes can be substituted for a double boiler.)
- Spatula long enough to reach the bottom of the pan.
- Long-handled spoon.
- Cheesecloth or muslin.
- Forms for pressing the cheese. (A homemade press can be made from pan-shaped colander and a salad plate or a "follower." A 1-pound coffee can also may be used. Punch holes in the bottom of the can with an ice pick from the inside out so a cloth liner will not catch on the metal edges.

Make a follower out of the can lid in the same way.) See Figure 1.

- A press or device to put pressure on the cheese. Cans or glass jars that fit snugly in the coffee can may be used for this purpose. See Figure 1.

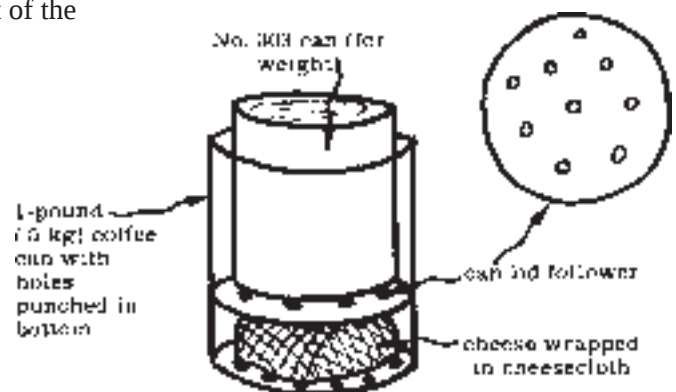


Figure 1: A homemade form for pressing cheese.

Specialty Cheeses

Homemade specialty cheeses can be created with either cream cheese or Neufchatel. Cream cheese makes a smooth-textured specialty cheese. Homemade Neufchatel is slightly lower in calories but does not have as acceptable a texture as cream cheese in such variations as pimento cheese and blue cheese spreads.

Pimento Cheese Spread

1 recipe of cream cheese

14 oz. can of pimentos, finely chopped

1/2 cup Thousand Island dressing or mayonnaise

Crumble the cheese. Combine with the chopped pimentos and dressing. Blend together thoroughly and chill well. Use as a spread on crackers, sandwiches or with vegetables such as stuffed celery sticks. (Makes about 1 1/2 pints.)

Bacon or Sausage Cheese

1 recipe Neufchatel

1 cup cured or smoked summer

sausage, salami or crumbled bacon

Add finely chopped meat to cheese curds just before pressing. Mix well and press as described in Step 8. Finished product may be slightly crumbly. This product spoils easily. Keep in refrigerator for no longer than five days.

Smoke-Flavor Cheese

Use Neufchatel. Add 1 1/2

teaspoons smoke flavoring to curds before pressing. Continue according to recipe.

Blue Cheese Spread

1 recipe cream cheese

1 cup crumbled Blue Cheese

Blend crumbled blue cheese with softened cream cheese. Store in refrigerator.

Cottage Cheese

Cottage cheese is also fun to make and delicious to eat. Recipes for it are found in many cookbooks and often are included in the directions in rennet packages.

Making Neufchatel

A milky-white cheese called Neufchatel (New-sha-TEL) can be made at home. It has a soft, smooth texture and is low in fat if reduced-fat or fat-free milk is used.

Ingredients

1 gallon pasteurized milk (any level of fat)

1 rennet tablet dissolved in 1/4 cup cold water

1/2 cup fresh cultured unsalted buttermilk **or** 1/4 cup fresh plain yogurt

3 teaspoons salt (optional)

Procedure

1. Put 1 gallon of milk into the upper part of a double boiler. Add enough water in the bottom of double boiler to prevent milk from scorching. Stir in buttermilk or yogurt and warm slowly to 92 to 94 degrees F. Maintain this temperature range through Steps 2 and 3.
2. Add one rennet tablet dissolved in cold water and stir into milk for 2 to 3 minutes. Allow milk to set undisturbed for about 30 minutes or until a firm gel forms. To test for curd formation, cut a slit in the curd with a metal spatula, slip under the curd and lift slightly. If the cut in the curd breaks clean, it is ready for Step 3.
3. Cut the curd into approximately 1-inch cubes. Stir gently and continuously for 20 to 30 minutes to help firm curds. Keep the temperature range 90 to 94 degrees F.
4. Pour off whey (yellow liquid). Allow the curds to settle and dip out the remaining whey.
5. Add 1 teaspoon salt, mix gently. Wait 5 minutes and mix in the second teaspoon salt. Wait 5 more minutes and mix in the last teaspoon salt.
6. Divide the curds into two batches and proceed as follows for each batch.
7. Line two coffee cans with clean cheesecloth or muslin. Place half of the cheese curd inside each lined can. Fold the cloth over the top and add the follower. (Refer to equipment list for suggestions.)
8. Apply pressure by pressing with a weight, such as a number 303 can of food, until the surface is smooth (2 to 4 hours). Do this in the sink to allow the whey to drain out of cans.
9. Remove the formed cheese and the cloth. Wrap the cheese tightly in plastic or in waxed paper and store in refrigerator. It will keep for seven to 10 days in refrigerator. It can be frozen for four to six months. However, freezing lowers the quality.

Making Cream Cheese

Ingredients

3 1/2 quarts pasteurized whole milk

1 pint pasteurized whipping cream

6 to 8 ounces (3/4 to 1 cup) fresh buttermilk or sour cream for starter

1 1/2 teaspoons salt (optional)

1 rennet tablet dissolved in 1/2 cup cold water

Procedure

1. Place milk, cream and starter in double boiler. Warm to 85 degrees F.
2. Add 1 rennet tablet that has been completely dissolved in 1/2 cup cold water. Stir gently for 4 minutes.
3. Cover the milk and let stand for 1 hour or until the whey covers the curd and breaks clean from the side of the pan. Maintain a temperature of 85 degrees F.

Microwaves for Cheese Making

The microwave oven can be used for cheese making, especially if you have a model with a temperature probe. A microwave eliminates the need for a double boiler.

4. Cut curd into 1-inch cubes and allow to stand undisturbed for 5 minutes.
5. Pour mixture into a muslin bag or cheesecloth-lined colander. Drain overnight.
6. With a wooden spoon, work in 1 1/2 teaspoons salt. Package and store cream cheese in the refrigerator.

Making Pizza Cheese

Ingredients

1 gallon 2-percent milk or 2 quarts whole milk plus 2 quarts skim milk
1/4 cup fresh, plain yogurt
1 rennet tablet dissolved in 1/2 cup cold water

Procedure

1. Heat milk to 90 degrees F and add yogurt. Stir slowly for 15 minutes while maintaining this constant temperature.
2. Add dissolved rennet and stir for 3 to 5 minutes.
3. Cover, maintaining temperature at 90 degrees F. Allow to stand until coagulated, about 30 minutes.
4. Cut curd into 1/2-inch cubes. Allow to stand for 15 minutes with occasional stirring.
5. Slowly increase temperature to 118 degrees F over a period of 45 minutes. Hold this temperature for an additional 15 minutes. (Total time for this step is 1 hour.)
6. Allow curd to settle under whey. Remove whey and transfer the mat of curd to a flat pan that can be kept warm. Do not cut mat, but turn it over every 15 minutes for a 2-hour period. Mat should be tight when finished.
7. Cut the mat into long strips 1 to 2 inches wide. Put curd in hot water (180 degrees F). Using wooden spoons, tumble and stretch it under water until it becomes elastic, about 15 minutes.
8. Remove curd from hot water and shape it by hand into a ball or a loaf. Place cheese in cold water (40 degrees F) for approximately 1 hour.
9. Remove cheese from cold water and put it into a saturated salt solution. To prepare salt brine, use 2 pounds of salt per gallon of water. Keep the brine cold (40 to 50 degrees F) while the cheese is in it. Excess salt will remain on the bottom, which is normal. Because a brine solution is corrosive, place in a heavy plastic, glass or pottery container. Cover any exposed areas of cheese with dry salt. Leave cheese in the brine for 24 hours.
10. Remove cheese from brine and let it dry for several hours. Wrap in plastic wrap and refrigerate. This cheese may be used immediately.

Storing Soft Homemade Cheeses

Store soft cheeses in the refrigerator and wrap them tightly in plastic wrap. They will keep seven to 10 days unless meat has been added for flavor. If meat has been added, the cheese is safe for no longer than three to five days.

Soft cheese may be stored in the freezer for four to six months. Freezing may change the consistency of the cheese, making it more crumbly.

References

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